

# What's in your stocking?

## Evidence around Santa Claus

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### Clinical question

What has research told us about Santa Claus?

### Bottom line

Santa is linked to kindness, although children might not like waiting in line to see him at the mall. Children often stop believing in Santa around age 7 and this bothers parents more than children. Just because some children stop believing in Santa does not mean he does not exist: some people do not believe in evidence-based medicine, yet here we are.

### Evidence

Is Santa linked to kindness?

- Adults (N=52) shown the same story told by the same man dressed as Santa or a doctor found Santa "kinder": 9.2 versus 8.7 out of 10 ( $P=.05$ ).<sup>1</sup>
  - There was no defined minimally important difference in kindness: but every little bit matters.
- First-graders (N=25) donated more gum when randomized to discuss Santa versus the Easter bunny or pets (3.6 pieces vs 1.3 to 1.6).<sup>2</sup>
- It is unclear if invoking Santa to promote good behaviour yields the intended results.<sup>3</sup>

Are children excited to see Santa in the mall?

- In a 5-year study of 150 to 300 children each year waiting in line to see Santa, 58% to 82% were indifferent according to a facial rating scale.<sup>4-8</sup>
  - More seemed happy 1 week before (30% to 37% happy) versus 4 weeks before Christmas (10% to 16%).<sup>6,7</sup>
  - More parents seemed happier (82% to 93%) than children did (6% to 37%).<sup>5,7</sup>
  - Reliability low (1 observer, scale used more for pain).<sup>4-8</sup>

When do children stop believing?

- From 1896 to 1987, 4 studies found disbelief started at a mean age of 6.4 to 8.3 years.<sup>3,9-11</sup>
- Age is the strongest predictor of belief.<sup>3,9-11</sup> "Fantasy" thinking (eg, imaginary friends) and the sex of the child are not predictive.<sup>3,10,11</sup> Parents' belief<sup>11</sup> beyond age 10 and parental encouragement<sup>3</sup> might predict believing longer.
  - The transition is usually gradual, with 54% of children "figuring it out on their own."<sup>9</sup>

Are children upset when they stop believing?

- Children had minimal distress transitioning to disbelief.<sup>9</sup>
  - Most emotional ratings were "<10% intensity" and generally positive.
  - Parents are more negative: 40% sad versus 6% glad.

-Most children feel future children should be encouraged to believe in Santa.<sup>12</sup>

- Only 8% of newly disbelieving children thought they would not teach their kids about Santa.<sup>9</sup>

### Context

- Other limitations:
  - When lining up in the mall, it is unclear if the children were seeing the real Santa or someone in a Santa suit.<sup>4-8</sup>
  - Some research was performed in summer,<sup>9</sup> early fall,<sup>1</sup> or around Easter<sup>2,11</sup> (known as *bunny bias*).

### Implementation

While it might seem unbelievable for one being to visit children all over the globe on a single night, it is likely more unbelievable that academics are paid to write this review. Given that Santa generates positive feelings and disbelieving children support Santa for future generations, a prudent approach would be to follow some old advice: "You'd better be good, for goodness' sake." 🍁

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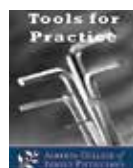
### Competing interests

None declared

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